

In Search of the Self

A Study of the International Scene of Modern Advaitic Satsang in Present-Day Rishikesh

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Abstract

Title: In Search of the Self: A Study of the International Scene of Modern Advaitic Satsang in Present-Day Rishikesh. **Author:** Elin Thorsén. **Language:** English. **Department:** Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Box 200, SE 405 30 Göteborg. **Series:** Dissertations defended at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, no. 66. **ISBN:** 978-91-89284-05-0 (print), 978-91-89284-06-7 (pdf).

The north Indian pilgrimage town Rishikesh has since the late 1990's become something of a center for the international scene of Modern Advaita. An increasing number of teachers and adherents from mainly Western countries have started to gather there for a few weeks each spring to engage in *satsang*, a form of dialogical lectures, in these cases based on contemporary interpretations of the classical Indian philosophical system Advaita ("nondual") Vedānta.

At the heart of Advaita Vedāntic philosophy lies the postulation that the inner Self (*ātman*) is identical with Ultimate Reality (*Brahman*), and in its essence is nondual awareness. In contemporary versions, "awakening" to such nondual awareness is usually presented as being within reach "here and now", rather than as a goal in a distant future.

Modern Advaita can be characterized as an "internalist" form of spirituality, as focus is put on the practitioner's gradual realization of nondual tenets through techniques such as meditation and self-inquiry. Salvific space, hence, is thought of as being located *within* rather than outside of the practitioner's body. At the same time, Modern Advaita is an ambulating movement, as teachers regularly go on tours to give satsang and offer retreats, and their followers often travel far to join these activities. As such, this is an inherently transnational phenomenon where mobility and locations play a crucial role.

Taking its starting point in Thomas Tweed's theory of religion as entailing "crossing and dwelling", *In Search of the Self* is an ethnographic work that investigates the aspects of movement and position within Rishikesh's Modern Advaitic satsang scene. It follows a group of satsang participants on their journeys to Rishikesh; their reported alternation between dual and nondual "space" during satsang; and their attempts to implement nondual teachings, partly by recreating satsang as a symbolic space, in day-to-day life at home.

Keywords: Modern Advaita, Neo-Advaita, Satsang, Rishikesh, Guru movements, Translocative religion, Spiritual tourism, Religion and globalization